

Running Out of Space

by S.J. Higbee

CHAPTER ONE

When I first saw him, we were wandering around Basement Level on *Space Station Hawking* in the Wolf system. Yeah – I know... Basement was asking for it. But sometimes, when you push your luck over an event horizon the black hole spits you out, instead.

Having said that, the charms of Basement soon vanished into hard vacuum once we set off from the lift. One light in four was working – and then only in [Dim] mode. The corridors were half the width of the upper levels, which doesn't sound overly putrid. Except I've seen sewerage tanks more wholesome than those walls, so you wouldn't want to brush against them wearing anything other than throwaways. And keeping off them was harder than you'd think, because we were wading ankle-deep in... stuff.

Donice punched my arm; "This must be homely for you, Jezzy. Floor looks like your cribicle after you done tidying."

I raised my voice over Alita and Efra's sniggers, "But the smell isn't as vile as your boots, amiga."

The chicas' laughter bounced around the filthy corridor, which eased the mood for a couple of mins. But did nothing about the putrid smell. Behind us, Efra and Alita stopped.

"Let's turn round. Unblock the heads is more fun than this." Efra wrinkled her nose. "Even the natives got sense enough to be someplace else."

Donice drowned out Alita's muttered agreement, "We've gone promming around for less than a nanosec – and you wanna run back 'cos the scenery isn't the same as on board." Clicking her tongue, Donice continued. "Starting to sound like those old ship-abuelas, chica."

I flinched at the scorn in her voice.

She's right. So what if this place is a dank disappointment? We didn't come down here for the view – we came to prove a point.

As we started off again, a grimy woman scuttled past, forcing us far too close to the walls to give her space. Keeping her head down, she didn't even acknowledge our greeting.

Alita grabbed Donice's arm, "Efra and me reckon this is a muy vile place, chica. We vote to head back."

I was inclined to Alita's way of thinking. Tramping through filth was a maloroso waste of shore leave and I was opening my mouth to say so, when the floor crud heaved behind us. In the gloom, a cat-sized rat scuttered through the litter. I *hate* rodents...

I shivered. "Place gotta get better sometime, soon. The next lift we see, we'll snag."

Just as I was beginning to think the scuzzy corridor was leading into infinity, we turned a corner into a small plaza. Which makes it sound a lot more bueno than it deserves. Si, the lighting was brighter and the floor litter had been trodden flatter, but the bustle and buzz that normally goes with buying and selling wasn't here. Under the stink of rotting rubbish was the sharper stench of desperation. Passing a trader's eye over the ratty stalls, everything on display would've gone straight into *Estrella's* recycler. The food canisters looked disgusting. And the water on sale might have shown <Blue> on the pacs' Purity Scales, but the readings must have been flixed, because that cloudy stuff wasn't fit to pass your lips. Even the powdered water looked like sweepings off a shower-stall floor.

The people didn't improve the scenery, either. Their skin was grime-grey – no matter if they'd started out yellow, brown, black or white. All wearing rags pockmarked with holes showing more tatters - or dirt-scurfed flesh. I'd tried to blend us in. We were all in scut-gear – worn overalls and battered workboots. But looking around, we were the bestest dressed by a long light year. Mostly because we were *clean*. And attracting far more attention than was healthy. Catcalls bounced off the grime-crusting walls from the snot-nosed kids capering behind us.

If we hadn't come down here – I'd never have known this place existed. How many others on 'Estrella' know about it? Somewhere different – somewhere Other. This is what I joined the ship for...

My heart thudding with a mixture of fear and excitement, I felt *alive*. This beat trailing around overpriced shops on Trader Level accompanied by a grumbling chaperone.

So long as I get us out in one piece...

My amigas closed up.

"Rock steady, chicas," I muttered, trying for friendly eye contact with the natives – and failing.

"Make for the lift at one o'clock. But let's do it ee-z-ee," I breathed.

Someone shouted something. Whatever it was passed for wit down here. An explosion of noisy laughter was followed by a fusillade of crude comments from the hombres clustered around the graffiti-covered alcho bars lining the plaza.

"Need to blue-shift our bods back up to Trader Level," muttered Alita, treading on my heels, "'fore some Dregger reckons we'd make a tasty snack 'tween the babies he's been gorging."

"Wouldn't wear my vocals out on such sense-vac'd drivel if I was you," I responded in my best imitation of the Cap, trying to close down this conversation before my amigas talked themselves into doing something stupida. Like being the least bit afraid.

These Dreggers will smell fear quicker than a miner probe can tag a seam.

"Yeah. If they was eating babies, they'd be a deal less bone-thin," added Donice.

Efra laughed.

Her high cackle ricocheted around the echoing space.

In the taut silence that followed, we were surrounded.

“Share the joke, then. We could all do with a laugh.” The mossbanker who loosed the comment looked as though that sneer was stuck across her face.

I raised my hands, palms out. “Hey – no harm meant, senorita. She isn’t that funny.”

Donice added, “For sure.”

The Dreggers looked even sourer - which took some doing.

A rank-smelling arm snaked around my shoulders, “And where d’you call home, flower-face?”

Don’t stiffen. He’s human – same as me. Even if he doesn’t look it.

Remember to smile...

Breathing through my mouth at the blast of foulness from his rotting teeth, I lied, “Service Level. Reckon we’ve taken a couple of wrong turns.”

“Yeah. An’ the rest.” His arm tightened while he groped my breast. “I could put you right,” his grin looked like something out of a horrorvid, “for a price.”

He lunged towards me, mouth puckered for a kiss as I twisted out of his bony grip. “Hey, you boys surely are fast workers. Cut a nina some air, why don’t you?”

“That wasn’t nice. Reckon you need a Basement Level lesson in manners,” he leered.

I didn’t quite dodge his slap across my face. Blinking away the sting, I cursed my null-brained slowness.

Donice jostled my elbow, going for her jacket pocket. Efra and Alita bunched behind her, facing out.

The Cap discovers that we drew our weaponry, he’ll make that slap look like a love tap.

“Easy, chicas...” I muttered, turning back to the Dreggers.

Bilge-Breath’s snarling smile told me that he hadn’t *wanted* me to return his kiss. It revved all his engines to hurt. And I was currently top of his piclist.

The sneering girl nearly looked happy, “Give her a good seeing-to, Norby. Teach her and her up-swept little friends to come zoo-gazing down here.”

I kept trying to make eye contact with each Dregger blocking our path. “Step away. Now. We don’t want no trouble. Just let us go and we’ll take our leave with our humblest apologies for having sullied your airspace.”

Norby’s grin displayed a mouthful of blackened stumps as he swaggered towards me.

“Gotcha back, amiga,” Alita’s whisper heartened me as I faced him.

Probably a space-brat with those teeth.

I hoped so. Because if he were, I’d probably beat him one on one – so long as he didn’t pull a gun. Or breathe over me. Moving my weight onto the balls of my feet, I filled my lungs. A mistake. My stomach heaved as I caught another faceful of his halitosis.

“Ain’t going to happen, flower-face. I’m helping myself-”

“Pining for more brig-time, Norb?” This voice sounded different.

As the Dreggers spun round to face him, I saw who owned the voice.

And I was lost.

I’ve often wondered since – why? Was it because I was in a tight corner and mushily relieved at someone lending a helping hand? Yeah – but I’d been in equally hard spots. Or if I hadn’t, yet... later on, when I *was*, I didn’t fall at the feet of my rescuer.

Maybe, it was because he was so beautiful. Even wearing rags he looked like the vidstar, Reyes Nova, with his shoulder-length sun-gold hair, perfect mouth and Earth-blue eyes.

Norby scowled, “Don’t recall asking you, Wynn. Crawl back to your pit, why don’t yer?”

Wynn shrugged. “If you had a nanospec of brain, you wouldn’t need telling.” His gaze swept over us.

Hey... Look at me!

“Young flesh...”

I’m old enough.

“... faced with the prospect of a sesh with you, Norb, she should be wetting her sweet self.”

Sweet... he reckons I’m sweet.

“And she’s not.” He jerked his head at us, “Look how they’re standing. They’re tooled, is my guess.”

In two long strides, he was at my side, the rest falling back to let him through.

My heart hit the back of my throat, as I smelt the resin sweetness of his skin and hair.

“Seen the quality of this cloth – and these boots? My guess is they’re tourists. And you know what *that* means.”

The girl who’d started this biz pushed forward, her face flushed as she raised her voice over the yells and curses following Wynn’s comment, “That truth? You little cats from the stratos-levels?”

“Yeah. As it happens. But it wasn’t no zoo-gaze.” My chin came up as I locked looks with her, “T” was more of a case of el Capitan saying I couldn’t – and me reckoning I could.”

“Oh yeah?” Rolling her eyes, she folded her arms, “And why would ‘el Capitan’ be passing more than the time of day with you?”

Wynn’s resin scent grew stronger as he moved closer. “Don’t be denser than a black hole, Milla. ‘Cos this capitan is her papa... or big brov. She tells the others when to take a breath – and they do it. No way would that happen if she wasn’t some ship princess.”

I bit my lip at his tone.

His hair caught the dim lighting in sun-spilt flashes as he flicked it over his shoulder, “And if I’m right,” his voice suggested he generally was, “then we’re all in for a world of sorrow should she press her [Panic] stud.”

And at last – turning - he *looked* at me.

The filthy plaza, the desperate natives and mi amigas whirled away as I drowned in his sea-blue gaze, my skin tingling with awareness. Lightspeed thoughts zipped through my head.

See me. Look past the ship and my father.

Such bright blue eyes... Bet he’s got a muy bien laugh.

Reality struggled to surface. *No way will the Cap let me tangle the sheets with some station stray.*

Air left my lungs at *that* mental image. I unclenched my sweat-drenched hands as Donice jabbed me in the ribs.

“If you could holster your hormones, we could do with your input,” she hissed in my ear.

Norby stepped into Wynn’s comfort zone, making him blink as if sun-blinded.

“Want her for your own self, do yer? Our girls not good enough for you – that it?” The Dregger clenched his fist, evidently aching to hit Wynn but lacking the nerve.

The others glared at Wynn, their faces suddenly feral.

Any authority he had over these folk has just been flushed into hard vacuum.

His face tightening, Wynn seemed to realise it, too. But he didn't back down.

“Most of us don't think with our gonads, Norb. Was only thinking of getting them back to their mamas and papas in one piece.”

Despite his words, he darted a flickering look at me.

So, you feel it, too.

Milla's face was scarlet, “Don't give me that crud, you pox-mouthed twister!”

The realisation gut-punched me. *She's snagged up on him.*

“...think that you was *different*. But *she* minces by with her big brown eyes bulging at us – and you're all but panting to peel off that 'alpha grade' suit-” Milla's voice cracked.

Way too late, I moved to block her as she lunged at Efra. Who squealed as the Dregger ripped off her hairpiece.

Waving it in Wynn's face, Milla howled, “That's what you get with shiprats! Nudeheads – all of 'em.” Her face was ugly, “Wanna forn with *that*, now?”

His wide-eyed shock would have been funny, at any other time. “Pulped planets, Milla! I never knew you-”

I stepped forward, impatient. If he didn't know the effect he was having - looking like that – then it was time he did. Meantime, I had Responsibilities. Even if her heart was in pieces at her feet, no chica disrespected one of mine.

I held out my hand to the trembling Dregger, “Por favor. My friend's hair.”

Her sneer nearly split Milla's lips as, wiping her hand across her nose, she smeared it across the hairpiece, “That's what I think of you!”

Seeing Efra's white face, I remembered how she'd saved up her creds for this primo 'piece.

Basta!

Sweeping Milla's legs out from under her, I twisted the hairpiece out of her hand before she hit the ground. The oxy-thin air tasted metallic as I sucked it in.

“Muchas gracias.” My gaze grazed across the fallen girl, trying not to see the foodscraps, rat dung and decomposing freshmesh wrappers plastering her.

Norb swore. A couple of other hombres started towards us.

Donice's hand went to her pocket. “Don't.”

They stopped, clearly relieved at not having to take it further.

Turning to the bunch of Dreggers – and Wynn – I dragged my own hairpiece off.

“Yeah. This is what we are.” Swallowing hard, I dived into the cool blue of his stare. “Not ashamed of it. We wore these to merge into the background.”

Not that it did any good.

The taste in my mouth was almost as bitter as the realisation that the Cap was *right* to make anything lower than Service Level off-limits.

As Milla scrambled up, her glare smoked holes through Wynn, “Pack your things and go. No room here for you, anymore.”

His mouth twitched into a sad half-smile. “There's two pieces finished in my room. Keep 'em or sell 'em. Thanks and...” the smile slid from his face, “... I never meant-”

Busy picking bits off her smeared rags, her was voice flat, “Just go.”

Sighing, he strode away.

My heart folded itself into sharp-edged misery as Wynn marched out of my life as swiftly as he'd crashed into it.

Before he looked back, "Coming, then?"

We scampered after him as he lengthened his stride. As I drew alongside him, half running to keep up, he muttered, "Need to warp out of here at lightspeed. Before someone decides we should take a shortcut outta the station."

Would they really do that – flush us out of an airlock? I didn't know – but we weren't proning around to find out. We struggled to keep up as he ducked down a modcrete tunnel, scarce five feet high, which punched rough holes in all the bulkheads intersecting it. Despite all the filth and poverty we'd seen since coming down here – this discovery knocked the breath from my body.

*Do the Station high-ups **know** the structural integrity of this Level is compromised? Or don't they care because only Dreggers live here? Yeah, but if this Level blows, would the rest of the station survive?*

While I tried to dredge up formulae on stress analysis, we took yet another couple of turnings off the main tunnel. By now, we were crouching as the ceiling was only four feet from the floor. Which didn't improve the smell.

"What're we doing here?" Donice stopped, plainly jittered. "All we needed was this compadre to show us to the nearest lift. Not bury us down here."

Muted noises of agreement from the others meant mi amigas were about to peel away and strike out on their own – and I couldn't blame them. I'd led them into a swamp of trouble.

Not good enough! I should be working on getting them out, unscathed. Maybe the Cap is right. Maybe I am fit only for breeding...